Men of Dog Company man a 4.2-inch chemical mortar somewhere in France, 1944.

"We Did Not Feel We Were Heroes"

The 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion (Motorized) on Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944

By Mr. Kip A. Lindberg

The greatness of a nation cannot be measured simply by the percentage of the globe its territory occupies, or by its gross national product. True greatness can be found in the strength and character of its people, and since the birth of this Republic, we as a people have chosen to recognize those among us who, despite hardship, have performed their duty above and beyond expectation. Across the United States—in town squares, on public buildings, and in peaceful cemeteries—monuments stand to these individuals. More than mere decorations, these memorials serve as an inspiration to us all. They represent dedication to a cause and commitment to the preservation of our ideals of liberty and illustrate all too well that our freedom has been purchased with patriot blood.

However, there are monuments that, while just as inspiring, are not made of marble and bronze but rather of faded ink and brittle paper. In the archives of the U.S. Army Chemical School, we recently found several boxes of documents and photographs relating to the 81st Chemical Battalion (Motorized)[1] and its service in World War II. Among the newspaper clippings and reunion photos were two first-person accounts of the assault on Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944.

First Lieutenant Dave Frankel and Corporal Clyde Braswell both served in D Company (known as Dog Company) of the 81st. Their unit had been organized at Fort D.A. Russell, Texas, in 1942 and had been training for two years for the invasion of mainland Europe. In the weeks leading to the expected date of invasion, the battalion engaged in briefings; issued necessary equipment, rations, and ammunition; and waterproofed their vehicles and mortars. In addition, they participated in numerous amphibious assault rehearsals.

On 2 June, the men of the 81st were taken to the port of Dorchester, England, where they boarded the *USS Charles Carroll*, the transport that would take them into combat. For the next three days, the men

waited as foul weather battered the English Channel. They lay in clammy bunks, crowded into the oppressive confines of the hold, or checked and rechecked equipment while catching some fresher air up on deck.

Late in the afternoon of 5 June, the public address system came to life, issuing the recorded voice of General Dwight D. Eisenhower: "You are about to embark upon the great crusade," the loudspeakers announced, "toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you…." As the speech continued, Captain Phil Gaffney, commander of D Company, turned to Lieutenant Frankel. "Dave, you take these papers with you," he said, handing the bundle to his subordinate. "I won't make it tomorrow." The act was unsettling, and Frankel could do little more than try to assure his captain that everything would go well the next day. "[I was] too busy to think a great deal about what would happen in the days ahead," recalled Frankel. "I was somewhat of a fatalist," he continued. "If I made it, I could only hope that I would not be maimed or severely injured. The thought of being killed instantly didn't bother me."

Corporal Clyde Braswell (left) and First Lieutenant Dave Frankel (right) survived the Omaha Beach landing and wrote about their experiences there.

The armada left port soon after sunset and steamed into the English Channel; at 2 o'clock the next morning, the men were roused for breakfast. The cooks, knowing this might be the last meal for many, pulled out all the stops. "It was a hellava [sic] breakfast," remarked Corporal Braswell, "only I lost it soon afterward." As the men finished their meal, the ship's galley and dining salon were cleared, and a large contingent of Navy doctors and corpsmen began to transform the space into emergency operating rooms. The men didn't have long to take in this foreboding sight, because orders were issued to report immediately to their respective landing craft for embarkation.

The assault force transferred from the large transport into the landing crafts, vehicle, personnel (LCVPs). Made by the Higgins Boat Industries, Incorporated, these small, wooden-hulled craft (also called Higgins boats) could carry a single mortar squad and their equipment. Once loaded, the craft circled in a rendezvous spot about three miles from shore, waiting for the signal to head in. The men of the 81st were attached to the 16th Infantry and 116th Regimental Combat Team—the Dragon Soldiers would be part of the second wave to land on Omaha Beach. "The old channel was plenty choppy," reported Braswell, "and pretty soon you noticed the other fellows' faces getting pale and a scrambling for vomit bags."

Through the gray light of dawn, the faint outline of the coast became discernable. Hundreds of shells and rockets began to strike the beach, searching for enemy pillboxes and creating a smoke screen to obscure the first wave from the German defenders. "It seemed like an eternity," said Braswell, "watching wave after wave of planes passing overhead and bobbing on wave after wave of water underneath."

Their landing crafts made for the beach at H Hour plus fifty minutes, when the situation at Omaha Beach was still very much in doubt. The LCVPs formed a line abreast and took the azimuth of their assigned landing area sectors: Easy Red and Dog Green. The sound of incoming shells now became audible over the noise of the craft's engine. Lieutenant Frankel looked over the side of the craft and remarked to his radioman that it didn't look too rough. "It became apparent to me that we were really going into combat. My three years of training would either pay off or come to a sudden stop," he later recalled.

Corporal Braswell, riding in a different Higgins boat, shared Frankel's curiosity. He raised his head over the gunnels to catch a quick glimpse of the approaching beach, noting that the obstacles and belts of barbed wire were just like the ones in the aerial photographs they had seen in briefings. "Suddenly it sounded like a riveter was at work…" he wrote. "We had never heard that noise before, but no one had to tell us that it was machine gun bullets pecking on our ramp."

When the ramp dropped, Lieutenant Frankel emerged into a world of choking smoke, flying shrapnel, and bursting machine gun fire. Jumping into chest-deep surf, he realized the water was no longer ocean blue, as it had been in the training assaults in

England. "The dead were everywhere," he reported, "and the water was red [with their blood]." He quickly took cover behind a submerged steel obstacle, as bullets and shrapnel ricocheted around him. One fragment struck Frankel in the face, slightly wounding him. He was, however, more concerned with the rising tide. "[It] was gaining on us faster than we were gaining ground," he recalled.

Corporal Braswell had just stepped off the ramp of his LCVP into neck-deep water when the adjacent LCVP grounded on a mined obstacle and exploded. A large piece of shrapnel struck his carbine, ripping it from his grasp. "I remember a flush of anger at that moment," wrote Braswell. "That was the gun I was issued at [Camp] Pickett, and I had kept it in good condition so long just to lose it on the pay run." Like Lieutenant Frankel, Braswell was forced by the heavy fire to take cover behind a tetrahedral beach obstacle. Crouching in the cold surf, he felt as if he was freezing. "I had never been so scared in my life as I was… on the beach," Braswell said. He could feel his chest constricting, and the sensation of being suffocated overcame him. It was not, however, the cold or his fear that produced the feeling. Instead, it was his lifebelt, which had been accidentally inflated. Braswell punctured the belt with his knife, relieving the pressure immediately. "I could hear machine gun bullets smacking into the discarded life belts all around me," he recalled, "and decided my position was not good, so I made a record-breaking dash for the protection of a little wall on the beach." After retrieving another carbine from a fallen soldier, he tried to contact Captain Gaffney by radio. His attempts were in vain. Captain Phil Gaffney had been in the adjacent LCVP and had been killed in the explosion.

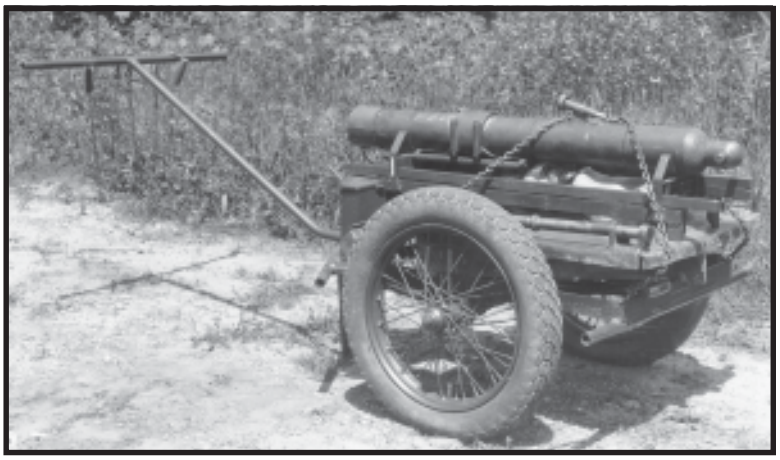
The other men of D Company were busy as well. Despite heavy casualties among the noncommissioned officer and officer cadre, the men performed their duties in an extraordinary manner. When heavy enemy fire, high surf, and the abundance of beach obstacles caused landing craft to discharge their cargo far from the beach, the men tied their own life belts to the mortar carts and swam their weapons ashore. This was certainly no easy task, as the carts weighed almost 500 pounds fully loaded.

When one cart sank after machine gun fire shredded the life belts attached to it, four D Company soldiers launched a determined effort to recover their weapons. Each man was repeatedly wounded as the group struggled against the tide, reattaching life belts to the cart and floating it ashore. All four men refused medical attention until they achieved their goal—getting their mortar ashore and into action against Hitler's "Fortress Europe."

Corporal Braswell wrote just days after the battle: "Everything is a little hazy to me. I can remember shells coming in on the beach, burning vehicles all around us, and trying to dig into the sand and gravel of the beach. It was so crowded that someone would throw a shovel full of sand in your hole every time you scooped one out."

When an amphibious truck or DUKW (pronounced *duck*) carrying ammunition was hit and exploded, a rain of falling ordnance pelted the beach. Braswell's second carbine was smashed, along with his radio, by a falling unexploded mortar shell. Undeterred, he armed himself with a German rifle and pressed the fight inland. Lieutenant Frankel, stumbling over the submerged body of an American soldier, led a portion of his company up the steep slope and routed German defenders from their positions overlooking the beach.

The mortarmen of the 81st provided the first direct-fire support on Omaha Beach that day and, indeed, fired the first American support missions on the European continent. In the two weeks of combat after D Day, this battalion alone fired more than seven thousand rounds of 4.2-inch high-explosive and white phosphorous shells in support of the Allied breakout. The combat initiation of the 81st had not come easily. Nearly two dozen men had fallen, most from A and D Companies. Casualties had been especially high among the officer cadre: more than a third had been killed or wounded, including the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. James. Writing to a friend, James proudly stated, "The men went in early, took their losses in a perfectly



The mortar cart, packed with the 4.2-inch chemical mortar components, weighed 491 pounds.

hellish situation, and distinguished themselves in their first action."

Uncommon valor was a common occurrence on 6 June 1944. For their actions to retrieve their submerged mortar cart, Sergeant Raymond Nicoli, Technician 5 Felice Savino, Private Donald McLaren, and Private Benton Porter received the Distinguished Service Cross. Private Kenneth Kidwell, a member of the battalion medical detachment, also received this award. Seeing a group of wounded men struggling in the surf, Kidwell— fearing they would either be hit again or drown as they were swept to sea—repeatedly ran through a gauntlet of intense enemy fire to rescue them. Wounded, Private Kidwell gave these men first aid with complete disregard for his own safety.

Men of Dog Company pose with a captured Nazi flag, Germany, 1945.

First Lieutenant James Panas, executive officer of A Company, received this decoration for his gallant leadership. After rescuing a wounded soldier struggling in the surf, Panas watched as his company commander was repeatedly hit by machine gun fire. Running through the beaten path, he reached the mortally wounded man and carried him ashore. After administering what medical aid he could, Lieutenant Panas took command of the company, leading them off the beach and into firing positions on the bluff above.

The men of the 81st had not only lived up to their motto, "Equal to the Task," but also surpassed it. "We who landed on Omaha did not feel we were heroes," explained Lieutenant Frankel. "… We were fighting for freedom and to make the world safe for democracy. I think most of my men felt that we had a job to do and 'let's get it behind us,' otherwise, the way of life that we knew and loved would be lost."

In the Norman town of Vierville-sur-Mer, France, a bronze plaque decorates the wall of the village church. Half a world away, this plaque joins a large stone monument at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, as physical memorials to the service of the 81st Chemical Battalion (Motorized). The story of the 81st is one worth telling and is one that demands to be preserved. These Dragon Soldiers exemplify the proud tradition of the Chemical Corps, and their values of sterling service, selfless sacrifice, and dedication to duty are timeless. By remembering these qualities, we are forced to uphold them, take them as our own, and strive toward excellence. Perhaps this is the greatest memorial of all.[2]

Endnotes

[1]The battalion's name changed from the 81st Chemical Battalion to the 81st Chemical Battalion (Motorized) on 25 April 1942. It was then redesignated as the 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion on 22 February 1945.

[2]The Frankel, Braswell, Christiansen, and Gibbs groupings (1941 to 1945) of the 81st Chemical Battalion (Motorized) collection, found in the U.S. Army Chemical School historical archives, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, are the sources of this article.